

AN OLD FRIEND

This woman at the door to my room
in the Pittsburgh Hilton could

not be Sheila, could be her youngest
daughter's grandmother, the way her hood

of child-scrawled hair with cobweb gray
strains back the skin of her face. I would

have guessed her close to sixty, stranger's
guess, not still in her forties. I face

her with shock; but more than shock, it is age,
my old age, that affronts me with its trace

of a once-familiar person so well
secluded. But now I must erase

the first chill outlines that shape my eyes,
invite her in, attempt to dispel

the inevitable comparison
of her life to mine, although I smell

the shameless stench of misfortune trail
beside her skirts through the borrowed cell

of my importance, ill at ease, almost
too apologetic to inhale.

I do not fail to note the expense
of my shoes, each well-tempered fingernail,

next to her boot-rag clothes and the red
hide of her hands. The brunt of her tale

was to marry badly, be abandoned,
but not before five unwarranted

children were born. This did expected
hurt to her body. But worse, it bled

the focus of her talent, perhaps
genius. I know. All her friends have read

her life, have written of it, and have
folded it up again on the scraps

of crinkly blue onionskin paper
it occurred on, fastening the flaps

of the envelope with a shake of the head.
She sits and soon her shoulders collapse,

palms upward, as one should never sit,
and she would not be Sheila unless

she had two canvas bags stuffed with sheet
music, two recorders for duets,

and artist's pads in case we will sketch.
We were raised at the same address,

but I clambered up counterclockwise,
like bindweed, while she grew up like vetch

around life's long palings. I revise
my sympathy; I will not presume

that her life would have been mine except
for those small things I could itemize

(and started to). A fragile perfume
issues from where her soul has been kept:

they are poems written on goldenrod
foolscap somewhere in an upper room.

A WALK IN TAKASHIMADAIIRA

-- to Teruo

This is your country
and you have to live in it,
yet you clearly seized my hand in bold daylight,
in the clamor of the street,
and held on to it through three red-lights, across
the railroad bridge, past the bicycle shop, right

to your apartment door.
As we broadsided a fleet
of teen-age boys, you must have felt my hand fight
your grasp, because you quickened
your fingers like the tines of a cage around
a fitful bird, quenching there its fit for flight,

and we sedately
erased their loafing glances.
Suddenly I am sailing through the skylight
of André Masson's ceiling
and the world's hateful gray has been blown away
beneath marblings of azure and crocoite,

gold and cinnabar.
Now I might be Pepito
in love with Miss Ruiz, floating on a bright